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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CONAKRY 000440

SIPDIS
SENSITIVE

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TAGS: ELAB PGOV ASEC GV
SUBJECT: HEALTH UNIONS HOLD TWO DAY LABOR STRIKE

¶1. (U) SUMMARY. Guinea's health unions staged a 48 hour nationwide labor strike on Monday and Tuesday due to the GoG's lack of response to demands dating back to 1992. More than half of the country's public health workers reportedly participated in the strike, effectively crippling public health services. The GoG signed an initial agreement with the union late on August 12, but negotiations are expected to continue as many of the union's demands have not been addressed. The strike represents yet another specialized interest group making its move to pressure the GoG to meet financial demands in the wake of the May military mutiny.
END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) Following a series of negotiations dating back to May 2008, Guinea's health union, the Federated Union of Professional Health Workers (FSPDS), resumed a nationwide labor strike on Monday, August 11. The strike was then suspended just before midnight on August 12 after union leaders succeeded in reaching an initial, written agreement with the GoG. During the 48 hour strike, many public health workers throughout the country stayed at home, leaving health centers and hospitals severely understaffed.

¶3. (U) On August 13, A/DCM met with FSPDS Secretary General Mme Pierette Tolno, and her colleague Dr. Daouda Conde. In addition to his role within the union, Dr. Conde is also the Secretary General of Youth within the Ministry of Health. FSPDS is a member of the larger National Confederation of Guinean Workers (CNTG), which is led by Mme Sera Rabiatou Diallo.

DEMANDS DATING BACK MORE THAN 15 YEARS

¶4. (U) Dr. Conde told A/DCM that FSPDS has been demanding better working conditions from the Guinean Government since 1992, but has had no success in winning any concessions. He noted that FSPDS held a strike for one week in 1999, but then suspended it to appease public upset over the closure of health facilities. Dr. Conde said that the GoG has made a number of promises over the years, but has never signed any formal agreement.

¶5. (SBU) Union demands include calls for an increased transportation allowance, professional insurance, provision of uniforms, salary increases, regular monthly payment of pensions, payment of 18 months worth of salary arrears to 625 health workers employed in February 2005, and continuing education opportunities. Offering an example of the Ministry of Health's poor compensation packages, Dr. Conde said that health workers responsible for keeping hospitals and clinics clean earn less than 75,000 GnF (\$16.66) per month.

INITIAL AGREEMENT REACHED, BUT MORE TO BE NEGOTIATED

¶ 6. (SBU) Mme Tolno said that a written protocol between FSPDS and the GoG had been signed, but that copies had not yet been distributed. According to Mme Tolno, the GoG agreed to pay a monthly transportation allowance of 145,000 GnF (\$32.22) to every employee beginning in September. In addition, the GoG agreed to pay salary arrears to the 625 health workers hired in February 2005 who have been working since then without receiving a paycheck. Mme Tolno said that the FSPDS will continue negotiating with the GoG regarding their other demands, but agreed to return to work because a health strike negatively impacts the general population.

¶ 7. (SBU) When asked about negotiations with the new government, the union representatives said that the new Minister of Health, Dr. Mariame Beavogui, has been very responsive. According to Dr. Conde, just a few days after assuming her duties, the minister requested a meeting with FSPDS after seeing a copy of their demands on her desk, which were reportedly left there by the previous minister. "We were very satisfied with how quickly she responded to us," Dr. Conde said. She reportedly told union members that she would address their issues, but requested time to work on them as she was new to the job. Dr. Conde pointed out that since the minister herself is a doctor, she is fully aware of the issues they face.

INTERNAL UNION DISSENT

¶ 8. (SBU) Dr. Conde also shared some insights into the actual CONAKRY 00000440 002 OF 002

negotiations between FSPDS and the government. He said that the union sent six representatives to negotiate, but gave explicit instructions that the representatives should report back to the broader union membership before formalizing any agreements. Visibly agitated, Dr. Conde described how the representatives turned off their phones and refused to talk to other union members during the negotiations.

¶ 9. (SBU) Frustrated by the lack of communication, Dr. Conde said he went to the where the negotiations were taking place and offered to relay messages back to headquarters. The FSPDS Deputy Secretary General reportedly told Dr. Conde that they did not need to answer to the larger group, likening the situation to that of "parents having to get permission from their own children." Convinced that corruption was behind the apparent lack of cohesion, Dr. Conde said that "certain union members have been sold." He pointed out that when he went to the negotiations, he saw the new Secretary General of the Presidency, Alpha Ibrahima Keira, there and that Keira came in and swept up all the documents saying that he would take them and consult directly with the president. Dr. Conde saw Keira's participation as inappropriate and suggestive of dishonest dealings behind the scenes.

COMMENT

¶ 10. (SBU) The unionized health workers are following in the footsteps of the teachers' unions, the police, and the military as various groups continue to make financial demands on the government. As with their teacher colleagues, FSPDS does not appear to have won much from the GoG except for promises of future payments and continued negotiations. However, the strike was legal, relatively successful, and the GoG responded quickly. Similar demands from other groups in the months ahead are likely as various organizations look to advance specialized interests. The fact that various unions are acting independently underscores the lack of unity within Unions-Intersyndicale, the broader coalition of unions that was responsible for pushing for reform in early 2007 and installing the consensus government under former Prime

Minister Kouyate. END COMMENT.
BROKENSHIRE